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THE ROAD TO PARADISE

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HE leaned on the dusty street piano, and taking off his shabby soft hat, let the breeze cool his bronzed forehead while he watched the man at work in the field. On road and meadow alike the August sun was intolerably hot; the toiler among the green rows was much better dressed and much hardier than the wanderer on the State highway, yet there were only sympathy and comradely interest in the expression of the "musician *pour en vivre.*" They were Italian-Americans, both; there the likeness ended.

The farmer went steadily on with his task, heeding nothing. But the other suddenly swung his machine nearer the side of the road, and seizing the handle, began to play. It was an old piano with a classic repertoire; of course it played the *Intermezzo.*

High on all sides rose the superb mist-blue mountains that formed the cup containing this valley of the Ramapo. To all sweet country sounds was added the musical roar of the river as it plunged past farm and highway in an endless series of crystal falls and dew-clear pools. His head thrown back, his wide eyes drinking in the scene, the wanderer played the music no instrument can quite spoil. And the farmer slackened his labor, listening; finally abandoned all pretense and stood with folded arms, intent.

When the music ceased, the farmer returned to his work. He gave no second glance to the player, nor did the latter look for acknowledgment. Smilingly, the musician picked up the handles of his heavy piano and went on. Youth does not always imply strength; he walked as one very tired.

At the extreme eastern edge of the little field stood the little cottage, nestled under two huge willow-trees. The capricious river here took a sudden incurve and ran close beside the strip of garden, so close that one might have touched the water from the rear windows of the house and the whole place was filled with delicate naiad-elusive murmurs. And on the porch railings leaned a girl.

She was beautiful; no one could have denied her that concession. Many an automobile party, shooting comet-like past on the way between Tuxedo Park and New York, had broken into a chorus of admiring adjectives upon catching a glimpse of Emilia. But she had more than the young loveliness of color and curve, for a charming and innocent goodness dwelt unquarrelingly with her pride of an heiress and a beauty.

The musician frankly halted to look at her, removing his hat with a Latin and quite unconscious grace. After a moment he smiled.

"May I play for you, signorina?" he asked, in his clear, pleasant voice.

"Please do," answered Emilia in the same soft Italian, her large, purely black eyes fixed upon his. "But will you not drag the piano into the shade?"

"A thousand thanks, signorina. I

shall remember your kindness a thousand years."

She rested her round elbow on the rail, her round chin in her palm, and listened. He played the *Cavalleria* again, then *Carmen,* then—woful interlude—the last comic opera waltzes. But *Trovatore* followed. Meanwhile the player gazed at the cool pink calico dress fresh as its wearer, at the imitation silver combs in her rippling black hair, and the gold-plated chain-bracelet on her dimpled arm—gazed at them as doubtless the Page gazed at the royal apparel of Kate, the Queen, with a heart-sinking sense of distance. The background for her was the snowily whitewashed cottage with its muslin window curtains swaying in the breeze, the neat, hilariously luxuriant garden, and the field where the old man worked in the shining rows.

When the last metallic chord ended, Emilia smiled gracious approval.

"That was ravishing. Will you not drink of the well water; it is cold, and you have perhaps walked far?"

"From beyond the mountains, signorina. From down there past Tuxedo Park, where they would not let me enter."

His accurate pronunciation of the English name arrested her attention.

"You speak English?"

"Surely, signorina. I was born in this country and have gone through the American school."

"And I!" she exclaimed eagerly. "I was born here in this house and went to the public school of the district."

They regarded one another, enchanted with the discovery of a mutual culture. Then, recovering recollection, he turned to raise the cool, dripping bucket from the well. But he filled the tin cup and offered it to Emilia before himself drinking. With the same pretty courtesy she accepted and drank, although her red lips were as fresh as his were dry with heat.

"Thank you, signore— I am Emilia Martini."

"Signorina, I am your servant. I am called Florio Sarto."

There was a pause, the departure naturally sequent perhaps not desired by either.

"Shall I play again for you, signorina, before I go?"

"If you will."

He played the limited repertoire once more. The rush of the river was in his ears, before his eyes the dazzle of a Fata Morgana of the heart. Very brightly the golden pinnacles glittered in the Ramapo sunshine, but out of reach! Mirage, only mirage.

"Signorina, I kiss your hands for your graciousness, and wish you good-by."

"Signore, you have given me much happiness with your music. May you have a good journey."

But as he passed out the gate, she suddenly ran down the path after him.

"Why," she asked breathlessly, "why did you play for the old man in the field? You—you knew he would give nothing."

She had given nothing, but beauty is accustomed to homage. Florio's lip arched, half merrily, half sadly. In spite of the gray dust of the road, he conveyed an impression of clean young wholesomeness. If his seriously intelligent glance contrasted oddly with his indolent occupation, no less was the neatness of his dress at variance with *its* poverty.

"Yes, I knew he would give nothing," he admitted. "But, he is not young, and it is hot in the sun, and—I thought he might like the music."

"He is my father; he owns the field and this house. Good-by—perhaps you will pass this way again?"

The field and the house, and Emilia! Really there seemed little difference between the elder Martini and the millionaires of the Park.

"Perhaps, signorina. I think not."

A locust rose whirring from the dusty wayside, sounding its strident heat-alarm. Florio picked up the handles of the piano and moved down the white State road, over which the windless air swirled in aerial whirlpools beneath the hot noon sun.

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He came again, however, on a Sun-

day morning a week later. He had not meant to come, but—he was twenty-four years old. As he approached the house from one direction, Emilia and her father arrived from the other. They had been to church, these two. Florio cast one devouring look at the girl in her splendid holiday attire of white muslin and pink ribbons, then would have fled by without a word, saluting her abashed.

But Martini halted him at once, upon a murmur from Emilia:

"Wait a little, wait a little! Come, you played for me the other day; shall I leave you out in the rain? See you the thunderstorm gathering? Come in, Signor Florio."

In fact, heavy black clouds were gathering over the valley, birds darted back and forth with warning cries and shrill protests. A long roll of thunder added its persuasive voice. Florio hesitated, yielded.

Inside, the table was laid ready. To see Emila tie on a huge apron and proceed to serve dinner was like seeing a bird of paradise usefully employed.

"You are from the North of Italy?" inquired Martini, watching his guest from shrewd black eyes, set under grizzled, overhanging brows.

"My people were from Lombardy," responded Florio, his gaze on Emilia. "I am an American."

"An American. You like to do that?" he shook a questioning finger toward the street-piano.

"No; I hate it," was the reply, given with a certain serene vehemence, decidedly convincing.

Martini stared at him, but the rain suddenly descended in torrents, imposing silence by its clamor.

"Let us eat," finally said the host, above the uproar.

The swollen river set the cottage vibrating, the lavender lightning gleamed through the mock twilight.

"It is merely an electrical disturbance," commented Emilia to her fellow-student of science, as imparted by the public schools. "Nevertheless," as a vicious bolt shot across the sky, "I am afraid."

"Signorina, what have you to fear from the anger of Heaven?"

She regarded him, both reassured and troubled.

But by and by the storm passed, although the rain still fell. Then, urged by a hint from Martini, Florio told them something of himself. His father had been an owner of vineyards, a peasant proprietor of means, in Italy. Failing crops and blight had sent him and his wife to America just before Florio's birth. They had remained in New York, living somehow, and educating their son to be a dweller in cities.

"But I hated the streets," Florio related, leaning on the arm of his chair, while his eyes rested on the dripping countryside, beyond the open door. "Look, you signore, how loves run in the blood. I dreamed, sleeping and waking, of green fields and sweet mountains, who never had seen them. But I worked for my parents in a factory, as they willed, until they died last year. Then I went to a man who had told me of the need for workmen in the West, among the great fields. 'Good,' he said, 'I will send you there, for to supply them is my business. But now it is Autumn, and all is done; come back to me in the Spring.' So I waited. I had no longer the work in the factory; it was hard to live. I shoveled snow for the city—I had never done such work, and I was often ill. All was nothing, for I was going to the fields in the Spring. When April came I went back to the man. He looked at me— 'What have you done to yourself? You are not strong enough for farm work. Go get well, then come to me.' That was all."

Martini gave a rough ejaculation of sympathy. Emilia's soft eyes widened, darkened.

"So I thought I would at least look at the free fields somewhere. If I was too weak to work, I would play. I took that piano and went out. It is good; I am stronger each day. When Spring comes again, I will be strong enough to go West."

"The winter is between," faltered the girl.

He turned upon her the indomitable resolution of his glance.

"I have learned a little. I will live."

They sat in silence for a space, until Florio offered the only return for hospitality within his reach.

"Shall I play? You perhaps like to hear the piano?"

"Divina Cavalleria!" sighed Martini, by way of acceptance.

Cavalleria, Carmen, the waltzes, and *Trovatore*—they had them all. The musician gazed at Emilia, the child of fortune.

Suddenly a ray of sunshine shot glittering across the wet windowpanes, a very St. George of a young breeze charged down the valley and sent the storm-dragon into sullen retreat across the mountains. The tempest was over. Florio rose.

"When you pass this way, stay to visit us," invited Martini, shaking hands at the door. "And pass often. I, too, am of Lombardy. There are Italians in this district, handsome enough, gay enough, clustering like bees around my doorsill—*altro,* they want my honey! Calabrians, Sicilians—Emilia talks with them, not I."

Florio flushed painfully. Emilia's color also rose, but she did not deny. Yet, when he stood on the glistening porch, she unexpectedly held out her little hand to the departing guest.

"And pass often, signore," she repeated roguishly.

Florio shook his head, but his glance was a cry against Fate.

August passed by the cottage, September went that way, but not Florio. Every day the automobiles sped, swaying up and down the white road, creaking farm wagons labored past, lithe motorcycles shot coughing by, but never an humble street-piano wandered an alien's path among them.

Yet there is a limit to fortitude. One amber October day Emilia was startled from a siesta by the metallic notes of "Il Trovatore."

"Nel fulgor del suo bel viso—"

Did they know the words? Being Italians, they did. But there was a full elucidation of the meaning, in Florio's expression, when the young girl ran out on the porch. Martini also had heard the piano, and presently came in from the field, wiping his brows with a blue and white handkerchief.

"Good, good; you are welcome! There is long between your visits, Signore Florio. *Ai,* it is hot harvesting in the sun!"

"It is the good work," said Florio sincerely.

"True, but I grow old. Emilia must marry and give me a son. Celso Lucca is an honest lad, if careless, and has means. She is a coquette."

They had dinner in the cool little room in which the roar of the river kept murmuring like a shell. This was a visit of farewell, Florio explained; he was going back to the city, since the summer was ended. Afterward he played all the repertoire again, as an adieu. Emilia wore a magnificent new coral necklace and new gilt combs in her dark hair, bewildering, depressing.

When noon touched afternoon, Florio shook hands and went away. He walked as if the piano were heavy; or was it his heart? He had the certainty now that Emilia was doubly out of reach, that she was betrothed to one Celso Lucca. When he was a mile from the cottage, he turned aside into a strip of forest and there flung himself down.

There was a full moon that night. What inherited custom sent its insistent demand through the Italian-American's veins? He did not know, but nevertheless he rose and silently dragged his instrument back along the road. Before the white cottage he halted, and began to play.

"Nel fulgor del suo bel viso—"

The rushing waterfall mellowed the notes, the exquisite midnight lent its magic to the magic music. Florio laid his left hand on the piano and rested his forehead against it, while with his right he played slowly, delicately.

A flash of blinding white light struck across his eyes, another roar than that of the river filled his ears and came mingled with laughing voices. Starting erect, he saw a huge automobile had

halted by the roadside, and a man in the driver's seat was leaning out.

"A serenade?" the stranger called gayly. "A troubador of the Ramapo! It is a serenade, yes.'

And then Florio first realized what he had been doing.

"Yes," he assented, standing straight and slender in the moonlight. "Yes."

A girl rose in the car, heedless of her companions' laughter, and flung something toward the player.

"Lover's luck!" she cried in a high, sweet voice. "We wish you success, sir troubador!"

The car sprang forward, was gone; the merriment drifting back in a diminishing scale. Mechanically Florio stooped and picked up a small white glove. As he lifted it, a five-dollar goldpiece slipped into his hand.

He looked at the coin, he turned, and saw a white figure at the window. And abruptly, self-control went down and fierce rebellion rushed through.

"Emilia," he cried passionately, "Emilia, you are there, you hear! Emilia, I love you. In a year, two years, I will come back. You will not wait, yet I shall come. For I love you. And if Celso Lucca offers gifts, I can offer mine—." He flung the goldpiece straight and true between the curtains, and heard it clink on the floor within. "Buy a comb, a necklace, a ribbon, and let me believe you wear it. Santa Maria guard you, Emilia."

There was a soft cry, but he did not hear. Someone leaned from the window, but he did not see. So blindly he fled that the piano was left, a forgotten waif from the city, standing forlornly in the garden. It was still there when dawn stepped across the mountains. Martini rescued the abandoned instrument, giving it shelter in a shed, not its ungrateful master.

* * *

How could Florio return to the city without returning the hired street-piano to its rightful owner? How without dishonesty could he leave another's property on the banks of the Ramapo? Yet, to go after it—

Two weeks after the serenade, a grinning country boy presented himself at the white cottage. He had come for the hand-organ, he explained to Martini. Florio had found this dull tool to cut his Gordian knot. Martini led the way to the shed in silence.

It was a Sunday morning, an October day, warm as June. A mile from the cottage, in the strip of forest, Florio waited the return of his messenger. The scent of the fields called to him, the wood-perfumes hurt his heart, the thought of the teeming city was a horror closing around him. Face downward, among the pine needles, he fought his battle.

The sound of the familiar bumping rumble aroused him. He sat up, pushed back his tumbled hair and rose. The boy with the piano stopped, looking over his shoulder.

Who was coming between the trees, bright in rosy silk? Whose lovely youth glanced like sunshine through the shadows, apparaled royally?

"I bought the gown," half laughed, half sobbed Emilia. "With your goldpiece, I bought *our* gown."

Dazed, dazzled, Florio caught the hands she held out to him

"Emilia! Emilia!"

"Why did you go? Ah, that West! But now you will stay."

"Yes, yes," nodded Martini, coming up breathless. "What she will, I will. Moreover, I like you well. Come home, come home, Florio."

"Signore, I am poor—a beggar—"

"*Pazzie,* you two will have the farm. I need a son, but she has been a coquette. You are of the good blood, not of the treacherous South. You have bought her wedding gown."

The little procession walked back to the white cottage by the waterfall. First, the boy with the piano, then the smiling Martini, lastly the other two. Emilia walked proudly, her hand on Florio's worn sleeve, the pink satin skirt fluttering against his shabby garments, as she stepped carefully in her little white canvas shoes. But Florio walked bareheaded in the sun, for the gray State road was the road to Paradise.